



A very material shift

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A very material shift-Occupational identities are competing with caste and religious identities in Madhya Pradesh

- The political mood of the people in Madhya Pradesh is complex.
- To understand voting behaviour only through the prism of caste is an outdated method in this State. In fact, occupational identities resonate across caste and religion.
- Employing the categories of farmers, labourers, government employees, small businessmen, the urban service classes, and so on helps us understand voter behaviour more clearly than categories such as upper caste, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).

Shifting identities

- In the wake of Mandalisation of politics in the early 1990s, when caste-based identity emerged as the dominant electoral fault line, Madhya Pradesh did not witness the replacement of traditional upper-caste political elites by OBCs as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar did, despite having the demographic logic for the same.
- However, now, after demonetisation and other factors, my two-phase field study in Madhya Pradesh in May-June and November this year suggests that occupational identities are now competing with caste and religious identities.
- A sense of solidarity around occupational identity has been forged by a combination of factors such as rampant lower-level corruption; destruction of the rural and agrarian economy and livelihoods allegedly on account of demonetisation; anger due to lower minimum support prices; anger due to schemes like the Bhavantar Bhugtan Yojana, which allegedly benefits the intermediary vyaparis; and the problem of digital payments that causes undue delays in money being credited into accounts.
- There is a consolidation of farmers belonging to upper castes, OBCs,

SCs, and STs rather than around their respective caste identities.

- Though the same doesn't necessarily translate into all of them making the same electoral choices, their articulation of these issues shows strong similarities.

Customised welfare measure

- At a time when a large section of farmers in the rural areas and those in the lower and middle classes in urban areas share a sense of perceived marginalisation, the government's political and policy responses reveal a subtle attempt to privilege socio-cultural identities over occupational ones.
- Customised welfare measures, particularly for those who fall in the Below Poverty Line (BPL) category, are seamlessly fused with caste-cum-religious markers.
- There are many policy announcements for farmers, a host of schemes for women, and there is rigorous implementation of the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (which was originally meant to cover the economically weaker sections and low-income groups but has been extended to the middle-income group as well).
- However, there are also socio-cultural measures that favour socio-political identities over occupational ones.
- The shift towards occupational identities signifies the privileging of material politics over cultural politics.
- However, it is different from the class politics of the 1970s, as markedly differentiated classes are consolidating under the same occupational frameworks.
- Also, the same process may not be true in States like U.P. and Bihar, where caste consciousness still holds the ground.

